

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Daily Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

July 2, 2010

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President Obama Calls for Comprehensive Immigration Reform

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama says the only way to repair America's troubled immigration system is through a comprehensive overhaul that also includes the means to bring an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants into the system legally.

Obama told an audience July 1 at American University's School of International Service that comprehensive reform means "accountability from everybody — from government, from business and from individuals."

In his speech, Obama called for legislative reform, which would require considerable support from Democrats and Republicans in Congress, but did not offer specific proposals. Opening the debate with this speech, the president is tackling an issue he pledged to address when he entered office 18 months ago. He faces a Congress that is preparing for mid-term elections in November that quite often cause their own political turbulence.

"Without bipartisan support, as we had just a few years ago, we cannot solve this problem," Obama said.

The speech follows two days of White House meetings on U.S. immigration policy with immigration activists, business and labor leaders, and members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. The last attempt by Congress to pass an immigration bill was defeated in 2007 when the president was serving as a U.S. senator from Illinois.

"In recent days the issue of immigration has become once more a source of fresh contention in our country with the passage of a controversial law in Arizona and the heated reactions we've seen across America," Obama said. "Given the levels of frustration across the country, this is understandable, but it is also ill-conceived."

"Our task ... is to make our national laws actually work, to shape a system that reflects our values as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants," the president said. "And that means being honest about the problem and getting past the false debates that divide the country rather than bring it together."

But Obama acknowledged that the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants broke U.S. immigration laws and they have to be held accountable even as the system is reformed. But he also said that trying to deport 11 million people is not possible as a way to resolve the issues.

Border security and enforcement policies have been improved without having to wait for a new law, Obama said, and today there are more enforcement officials along the U.S. Southwest border than at any time in U.S. history. The Department of Homeland Security has doubled the number of border enforcement personnel and has tripled the number of intelligence personnel assigned to border security duties, he said.

In addition, all southbound rail shipments are inspected, which has resulted in an increase in seizures of illegal weapons, cash and drugs, Obama said.

"Contrary to some of the reports that you see, crime along the border is down. And statistics collected by Customs and Border Protection reflect a significant reduction in the number of people trying to cross the border illegally," Obama said.

He acknowledged that work remains to be done, but said the border security issue presents problems too vast to resolve with only fences and border agents. "It won't work," he said.

The president said that those American businesses that hire and exploit undocumented workers must be held accountable, and workplace enforcement is increasing. The federal government is improving a system that gives employers a means of verifying if their employees are in the United States legally, he added.

"Finally, we have to demand responsibility from people living here illegally," Obama said. "They must be required to admit that they broke the law. They should be required to register, pay their taxes, pay a fine and learn English."

"They must get right with the law before they can get in line and earn their citizenship," he added.

Obama said being a U.S. citizen comes with rights, but also with certain responsibilities, and that a pathway can be created for legal status that is fair and reflects basic American values.

President Obama to Sign Bill on Additional U.S. Sanctions Against Iran

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama will sign legislation July 1 that expands unilateral U.S. sanctions against Iran's energy and financial sectors in response to the country's nuclear activities.

The new measure follows United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, passed June 9, U.S. Treasury

designations on June 16 of additional institutions and individuals that help Iran finance its nuclear and missile programs or evade sanctions against them, and unilateral sanctions adopted June 17 by the European Union and Australia.

The legislation Obama will sign (PDF, 23KB), passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate on June 24, would exclude from the U.S. market companies involved in selling refined petroleum products to Iran and would prevent foreign banks from accessing the U.S. financial system if they do business with key Iranian institutions or Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps.

According to press reports, U.S. lawmakers deliberately crafted the bill to close enforcement gaps in U.N. sanctions that have allowed Iranian financial institutions identified as being involved with Iranian nuclear and missile activities to continue doing business with companies in Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

In a June 24 statement, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the bill is "the strongest Iran sanctions legislation ever passed by Congress," and gives President Obama new tools to "impose sanctions against companies that sell Iran technology, services, know-how and materials for its energy and petroleum sector." It forces foreign banks to choose between doing business with the United States or dealing with institutions that support Iran's "weapons of mass destruction and terrorist activities," she said.

On multiple occasions, Iran's government has demonstrated "its refusal to work in good faith to eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons in the Middle East and around the world," Pelosi said. "In the last year, Iran has: concealed major nuclear facilities; repeatedly blocked U.N. nuclear inspectors from doing their job; and openly threatened to, as the Iranian president said quote, 'wipe Israel off the face of the map,'" she said.

"These actions reflect a clear record of defiance. Now Iran must take steps to demonstrate its willingness to live as a peaceful partner in the international community. And we must all use all the tools at our disposal to stop Iran's march toward nuclear capability," Pelosi said.

President Obama plans to sign the legislation at the White House after meeting with Vice President Biden, according to the White House. Under U.S. law, a president has 10 days after Congress passes legislation to either veto it or sign it into law.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs praised the measure as "a strong bill that builds upon the recently passed U.N. Security Council resolution, grants the president new authority, and strengthens a multilateral strategy to isolate and pressure Iran."

"We will continue to work with the Congress ... in our ongoing efforts to hold Iran accountable. As that effort progresses, we will also work with our allies and take independent action under the president's existing authorities, as we did last week in designating additional entities for sanctions," Gibbs said.

During a June 22 Senate debate on the bill, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry said Iran is estimated to have approximately 2,400 kilograms of reactor-grade, low-enriched uranium at its Natanz enrichment facility, which is enough material for two nuclear weapons. In addition, the country is believed to have begun enriching small quantities of uranium to a concentration of about 20 percent, crossing a nuclear threshold that experts believe could lead to nuclear weapons production.

A nuclear armed Iran would "pose an intolerable threat" to the Middle East and undermine global efforts to halt the spread of nuclear weapons, Kerry said, urging his colleagues to pass the bill.

"These steps to increase pressure are necessary not because we want to target Iran, but because Iran itself has decided to continue to defy the international community, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the U.N. Security Council," he said.

Trans-Pacific Partnership Aims to Improve Economic Integration

U.S. officials cite "significant, positive progress" in recent negotiations

By Alexis R. Carter
Staff Writer

Washington — Recent negotiations aimed at expanding the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) for trade cooperation recorded progress on a range of important issues, according to officials at the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR).

The officials spoke on the condition they would not be specifically identified.

Negotiations held June 14-18 in San Francisco concentrated on ways to intensify integration of economies in the Asia-Pacific region. The TPP, created in 2006 by Singapore, New Zealand and Chile, aims to promote regionwide economic cooperation. Officials from the eight current TPP member economies — Australia, Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam and the United States — aim to revise and refine the TPP to reflect 21st-century trade standards, which include ensuring worker rights and protecting the environment.

The recent talks "clearly defined" and examined goals for

improving and expanding the partnership, a USTR official said.

The goals included determining the architecture for market access negotiations, deciding the relationship between the TPP and existing free trade agreements (FTAs) among the negotiating partners, addressing “horizontal” issues such as small business priorities, regulatory coherence and other issues that reflect the way businesses operate and workers interact in the 21st century, according to USTR.

TPP negotiators clarified the relationship between existing FTAs and the TPP by agreeing member economies would continue current FTA requirements while adhering to any higher TPP standards. That determination lays the foundation for how TPP economies will precede in future negotiations.

On June 18, U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk praised the U.S. delegations and representatives of TPP member economies for achieving “significant, positive” progress during the talks and said the U.S. involvement is aimed at expanding the partnership to include more economies across the Asia-Pacific region.

The working group negotiation sessions in San Francisco addressed a wide range of topics, including the following:

- Agricultural products
- Business mobility
- Cross-border services
- Customs inspections and other procedures
- Financial services
- Industrial goods
- Intellectual property protection
- Technical barriers to trade

Other issues, such as small business priorities and labor rights, were addressed and incorporated into draft amendments to the TPP. Market access structure — systems that allow imports to move between economies without trade barriers — remains a key negotiating point, USTR officials reported. But they also said draft revisions to key texts are on track for completion prior to the next official round of talks in October in Brunei.

Prior to each of the June 14–18 TPP discussions, Assistant USTR for Southeast Asia and the Pacific Barbara Weisel briefed representatives of 28 organizations interested in trade-related issues “from labor rights to agriculture to environmental protection.” Most received invitations to the San Francisco meeting because they responded to a December 2009 USTR request for public comments on the TPP negotiations.

NEXT STEPS

Several bilateral meetings are being planned in advance of the third official round of TPP negotiations. The talks are projected to extend until the end of 2011, according to the USTR.

USTR officials expect that several more Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies will join the TPP before the next round of discussions. Current parties to the TPP welcome that interest and have established a process to facilitate additional new members.

Interested APEC economies received a TPP briefing at the Asia-Pacific trade ministers meeting June 5–6 in Sapporo, Japan. To become a party to the TPP, candidate economies must negotiate bilateral agreements and trade issues with each current TPP member, a USTR official said June 23.

The United States remains a firm backer of the partnership. USTR officials said members of the Obama administration are “quite supportive” of the TPP and predicted progress on all aspects of the partnership would be made in coming months.

Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Jim Webb, chairman of the committee’s East Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee, expressed congressional support for the TPP in a June 14 joint statement:

“TPP represents an excellent opportunity to change this dynamic and build a platform for region-wide economic integration. We look forward to working with the Administration throughout the negotiation process and to evaluating the completed agreement once it is submitted to Congress.”

Kyrgyz American Society Builds Community, Eases Transitions

Organization hosts cultural events, fundraisers for families in Kyrgyzstan

By Carrie Loewenthal Massey
Special Correspondent

New York — Moving to a new home is never easy. When that new home is also a new country, the challenges of organizing and packing pale in comparison to adapting to an entirely different culture.

Ernis Isabekov, who in 2004 brought his family from Kyrgyzstan to the United States, knows well the excitement and frustration that come with the immigration experience.

“We always dreamt of coming to America so that we, but especially our children, could have more opportunities at

a full and happy life," he said in an e-mail interview with America.gov. "The first couple of years were quite difficult for us because we couldn't assimilate into a new society. The language barrier was probably the greatest reason for this." But now, "we, as a family, feel much more confident in the American society," he said.

Eager to help ease the transition for other Kyrgyz immigrants to the United States, Isabekov now helps run the Kyrgyz American Society.

"Our mission is to give aid to people from Kyrgyzstan living in the United States, especially those who arrived recently," he said. "We help people with almost any [problem], especially problems concerning adaptation in America, whether it be finding certain people jobs or organizing athletic competitions and events through which they can relax from their immigrant lives."

Based mainly in New York, the organization also has contingents in Chicago, Cincinnati and Philadelphia. The society was founded in April 2009, and now has close to 1,000 members. "However, we are growing every day," said Isabekov.

There are no data on the number of Kyrgyz Americans; according to Isabekov, there are around 10,000 people from Kyrgyzstan living in the United States, with most settled in the New York City and Chicago metropolitan areas.

In an effort to connect the Kyrgyzstan immigrants and Kyrgyz Americans no matter where in the United States they've settled, the Kyrgyz American Society organizes several social events throughout the year. In 2009, famous musicians from Kyrgyzstan performed concerts in New York, Chicago, Cincinnati and Philadelphia. The artists performed traditional Kyrgyz compositions and modern pop music.

"The events weren't much different from regular American gatherings; however, everyone became emotional and nostalgic when hearing and seeing traditional practices such as national dances and songs," Isabekov said.

Additionally, two separate soccer tournaments brought together Kyrgyz Americans from different areas of the United States. While the events fostered friendly competition, they also offered a chance for Kyrgyz Americans living in different parts of the country to discuss their experiences and concerns. Isabekov said the society is especially focused on "ways in which members of our group and our acquaintances could assimilate further into the American society so that we may be beneficial to the United States community."

While its social events help to heighten a sense of community, the Kyrgyz American Society also provides critical resources to its constituents.

"We help those who are in trouble, beginning from sickness to immigration problems. We help with arrangements such as funerals through monetary ways. The purpose of our organization is very broad," Isabekov said.

Though focused on working with the Kyrgyz-American population, the society also strives to assist the people of Kyrgyzstan. These efforts typically include raising money to help fight childhood cancers and other medical issues that Isabekov says are prevalent in Kyrgyzstan. A large number of children lack proper treatment because of the cost of medical care there, he said.

Fundraising also helps support families in need as a result of unrest at home, such as the April disturbances that led to the ouster of the previous president and the formation of a new, interim government, and the June violence in southern Kyrgyzstan between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups.

"In April, during the revolution in Kyrgyzstan, we collected money in order to send it to the families of those who died in the tragic events. And now, we are collecting money in order to aid those families who have been hurt by the current events in south Kyrgyzstan," Isabekov said.

While eager to help those in need, the group does not have any political affiliation, Isabekov emphasized.

Looking ahead, Isabekov hopes the Kyrgyz American Society will continue to expand its membership and presence as a helpful community resource in both the United States and Kyrgyzstan. He also sees the organization as an important avenue to increased positive relations between the two countries.

"We want the people of Kyrgyzstan and America to become more aware and understanding of each other," he said.

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